DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 187 178 HE 012 570

AUTHOR Seib, Kenneth
TITLE Aunt Alice at the Country Club: Observations on the Academic Class Structure.
PUB DATE 19 Dec 79
NOTE 11p.

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Administrator Characteristics; Administrators; College Administration; *College Faculty; Employment Experience; Faculty College Relationship; Governance; Higher Education; Labor Market; Power Structure; *Role Perception; *Social Structure; Status; Teacher Administrator Relationship; *Teacher Role; *Teaching (Occupation); Trend Analysis

ABSTRACT

The notion that the university teaching profession is not the working-class is discussed. It is suggested that the failure of faculty to recognize that they are laborers could prove disastrous within the next decade. Universities and colleges are faced with declining resources, lowering enrollments, growing bureaucracy, and bleak prognoses for the future. The most serious threat to higher education is claimed to be the failure of quality leadership. There is a great distance between administration and faculty. Much of the present situation in higher education is thought to be the result of administrative mismanagement. Typical types of administrators are described. It is suggested that professors need to stop seeing themselves as some privileged class who are somehow apart from the world of work and everyday life. (SW)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED187178

Kenneth Seib
Dept. of English
Cal. State U., Fresno
Fresno, Cal. 93740

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

Kenneth Seib

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, EDUCATION & WELFARE
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION

THIS DOCUMENT HAS BEEN REPRODUCED EXACTLY AS RECEIVED FROM THE PERSON OR ORGANIZATION ORIGINATING IT. POINTS OF VIEW OR OPINIONS STATED DO NOT NECESSARILY REPRESENT OFFICIAL NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION POSITION OR POLICY

AUNT ALICE AT THE COUNTRY CLUB:
OBSERVATIONS ON THE ACADEMIC CLASS STRUCTURE

One of my colleagues is fond of telling the story of a visit from his Aunt Alice, a wealthy dowager who, having been born to fortune, was innocent of higher education. Never having had much contact with professors, Aunt Alice was invited by her nephew to attend a gathering of them at the local country club, where they could be observed sui generis as it were. From the safety of the clubhouse veranda, Aunt Alice watched them for a very long time. "Well, what do you think of university professors," my colleague finally asked. Lowering her lorgnette and raising herself to full splendor, Aunt Alice replied, "They look like working-class people to me."

Aunt Alice might have been more impressed with members of such a prestigious organization as the MLA--but I doubt it. Frankly, you all look like working-class people to me too. But the term "working-class" conjures up to most academicians the spectre of bib overalls and pipe wrenches, grimy hands and time clocks. As we all know, those are things we entered university life to escape. We did not so much gain employment, as sanctuary, taking refuge from the world of work in institutions specifically set aside by society for those who neither toil nor spin, but instead teach and think. Unlike the working world, which is divided between employers and the employed, we professors pride ourselves in being part of a community, sharing in a mutual collegiality with administration the daily governance of the university. We can even wear a suit and tie to the classroom if we wish, further indication that we are of that class suited and tied to the white-collar decision-making levels of

ME 012 570

our profession. If lucky, we are tenured, meaning that we have achieved at one and the same time a certitude of salvation from the world of work and an immunity from what Wallace Stevens called the "tink and tank and tunk-a-tunk-tunk" going on outside the university walls. As the early Christian monks well knew, the Devil rides outside--and while he may pay better than the university, he never offers sabbaticals and no one gets released time. Finally, as further proof of our distance from the world of work, we gather once a year at some luxurious spa or other to exchange learned views on such topics as "The Aesthetics of Skaldic Poetry" or "Computational Stylistics," reassured when we return home that there really are others in the world interested in Ovidean allusions in the Orlando Furioso, even if our students aren't.

Of all the comfortable fictions of the university, in fact, the most iniquitous is the notion that those of us in the teaching profession are not working-class. Aunt Alice knew it, just as most of those outside the university easily recognize it. Governors, legislators, chancellors, and trustees, while never admitting it, know it and act accordingly, and--make no mistake about it--university administrators know it very well. It is only the faculty, dwelling in that schizoid realm between fancied self-image and unrecognized fact, who seem not to know it--or if they do, won't admit it. But, as one of my students colloquially put it not long ago, fact has a way of fucking over fiction, and what is happening today in higher education seems to me to support the view that professors are simply laborers in a fairly pleasant vineyard. Their failure to recognize that fact of their own livelihood could prove disastrous within the next decade.

Should any tenured full-professor out there, comfortably teaching a six-unit load and drawing over $30,000 annually, mistake his situation for a rebuttal to my thesis, I would offer that he is sitting not in the catbird seat, but on the razor-blade of the profession along with the rest of us. Universities and colleges everywhere are faced with dwindling resources, lowering enrollments, growing bureaucracy,

and bleak prognoses for the future. Many private colleges are already facing bankruptcy, and faculty everywhere are being threatened with lay-off, retrenchment, cut-back, or whatever euphemisms are currently being used to hide the reality of job loss. Historians, philosophy teachers, and professors of foreign languages now find themselves teaching remedial English courses due to lack of enrollment in their own disciplines. California has had its Proposition 13, which others have yet to experience, and the effects are just beginning to be felt. Over the years there have been numerous assaults on the concept of tenure--in California a few years ago, the Trustees of the State University and Colleges came close to abolishing tenure--and further assaults are bound to come. Gail Thain Parker, former president of Bennington College, argues for the abolition of tenure in her recently published book The Writing on the Wall: Inside Higher Education, asserting that justifications of tenure from faculty are simply "ways of asserting their right, or what they see as their right, to enjoy special privileges. And they will use any convenient argument, whether based on mandarin or professional assumptions, to protect those privileges."[1]

While it is difficult not to agree with Parker that higher education has come upon hard times, I personally think that she has the right prognosis, but the wrong malignancy. She tends to see the increasing malaise of the university as a result of professorial other-worldliness and "faculty members' unwillingness to consider the practical implications of their theories about how colleges and universities should be run."[2] I tend to see it as a result of widespread administrative mismanagement and bureaucratic stupidity. In fact, I have come to believe in the last several years that the failure of quality leadership in higher education is the most serious threat to the university today. Furthermore, any talk of collegial relations between most present administrations and faculty or of the "shared governance" of the university is either a cruel fiction or a cleverer ploy. These are generally notions purveyed by higher education's managerial class to retain professors in the pervasive fog of their illusions, and it is generally accepted by those faculty, busily engaged in university committee work, who aspire to some middle-management position. We are, as John Dos

Passos stated in USA, "two nations," both comprising a world in which the blind typically lead the halt. The distance between administration and faculty, moreover, has never been greater or more obvious than at the present time. If layoff becomes a reality on any campus in the future, collegiality will be the first to go. In fact, when faculty hear the world layoff, they would do best to reach for their revolvers, for it is faculty positions, not administrative ones, that are on the line. I suspect, as a matter of fact, that if such a situation occurs, many campuses will develop new administrative positions to oversee the layoff process--a "Dean of Layoff" perhaps.

In the June, 1979, issue of Leaders, a magazine claiming limited circulation to "distinguished leaders of the world," Chancellor Glenn S. Dumke of the California State University and Colleges states what I suspect is the prevailing view of higher education among its managerial elite. In an article awkwardly entitled "What is a University Not?," Dumke recites a litany of negatives in order to focus on the university's proper function. A university is not a democracy, Dumke begins. If it were, he laments in a "God-help-us" tone, "the faculty (and, perhaps, students) would assume the function of the legislature; the administration would be an executive with little power other than to carry out the mandate of the 'legislature'; and the judicial function would be distributed among internal constituencies."[3] In fact, what you would have is genuine shared governance, clearly anathema to Dumke and his fellow leaders. Further, states Dumke, the university is not an egalitarian institution. It is, rather, "designed to separate, intellectually, the sheep from the goats--to use the authority of highly trained people to evaluate the achievements of individuals," and "to enable the most able to achieve positions of leadership." In Dumke's university, the sheep rise to the top, and the faculty are the goats. Finally, the university is not "a political platform or an agency to bring about social change." It is, instead, a place of "scholarly objectivity," according to Dumke.[4] Dumke's message to distinguished leaders of the world is clear: a university is a place where executive authority prevails, where administrators become administrators by virtue of their superiority, where

faculty remain faculty due to their lack of ability to become administrators, and where faculty are expected to have no opinions and social concerns, and are expected to keep their mouths shut. Anyone for shared academic governance?

Dumke may not be typical, but I fear he really is. This is not to say that there are no excellent administrators in higher education, moreover, for I have personally known several, and our own disciplines have produced noted ones in Hazard Adams, Roy Harvey Pearce, Jacques Barzun, and others. But the best of them have perceived themselves as teacher-scholars serving in an administrative role, and have remained active in or have eventually returned to the classroom. The worst are what one of my friends calls "stone administrators." My experience with them suggests that like other flesh-and-blood creatures--even, God forbid, like faculty--they range from the competent to the malevolently incompetent. If one must generalize, I would say that they have often risen through the ranks, via the Peter Principle, carrying the reputation of being among the worst instructors in the university. They have found safe refuge in management from the discontents and frustrations of the classroom, and they tend, out of some deep personal insecurity, to be ruthless wielders of administrative power, stern critics of student sloth and faculty irregularity. Recalling the student drops and attendance failures of their own classes, and remembering how similar courses taught by other colleagues would fill regularly while their own dwindled, they see all this as the result of slipshod regulations for student drops and attendance, easy grading on the part of colleagues, and general lack of university law enforcement. The reality never confronts them: they were rotten teachers.

There are other types of administrators found on practically every campus: the Benign Bunglers, often senior faculty who have proven their administrative bent by working tirelessly and equally incompetently on numerous university committees, and the Eagerly Ambitious, usually young faculty who perceive, not erroneously, that the pathway of upward mobility and success lies not through the classroom, but through the offices of Old Main. But the most recent type to emerge in the past decade is the Corporate Executive, usually a member of a School of Business or one of the Social

Sciences, and someone whose rise to a top management position has been nothing less than meteoric. The Corporate Executive is bright--often brilliant--decisive, and generally ruthless, but there is an essential paradox about him: as one of my colleagues put it about such types, the strain is mutant. If they were truly whiz-bang corporate managers, they would be in a corporation, pulling ten times their current salary. They clearly aren't in the university because they love teaching, for they generally don't teach. What in hell, one might ask, are they doing there? Administrating. They have found their niche in a world less demanding than that of business, and they have, in the university structure, a convenient closed system in which to apply their managerial skills. They can wield a computer or a feasability study like the ancient Visagoths could wield a club, and they bludgeon the faculty with graphs, charts, figures, and statistics. They keep an eye on the Big Picture, and if faculty, budgets, or curricula are cut, it is because only the Corporate Executives see the enormous and amorphous reality of the total university, while others see only a part. They have no institutional loyalty, however--chances are a Corporate Executive has made a lateral or upward move from elsewhere--and are loyal only to harsh facts and figures. They are less then candid with faculty, and their word is seldom worth anything. Who knows, after all, what the next computer print-out might show? Finally, the Corporate Executive, everyone feels, is slated someday for a cushy job with the Rockefeller Foundation or the Hudson Institute, or is perhaps being groomed for the presidency of a prominent university elsewhere.

If the university were really the corporation that such types perceive it to be, this managerial class would have been removed long ago by either the shareholders or the trustees. In fact, some of them are. The average tenure of a college president is about four years, and a great many administrators at the top levels leave--unpublicized, of course--because of internal pressures. In the California State University and Colleges system, for example, three presidents were removed by the Board of Trustees last year because of institutional discontent. But for the most part, this type of corporate managerial elite continues to grow. As one group of social researchers

noted, higher education's "total income, always related to administrative functions, has doubled every ten years since 1876; and since 1930 total income has more than quadrupled."[5] It has been even greater since the end of WWII, in keeping with Clark Kerr's concept of the corporate "multiversity." But as we approach the final two decades of this century, it is time for a summing up. What has this kind of leadership brought? Since the late 1950s we have seen an alarming decline in literacy in our nation's schools, colleges, and universities, to the point now where remedial English and mathematics, taught at about the level of a high-school tenth-grader, are firmly instituted at the college level. Enrollments are severely declining nationwide, especially in the sciences and humanities which were once thought to be the backbone of higher education. Few students come out of a four-year institution with even the most rudimentary knowledge of Western civilization, art, and thought, and with scarcely the use of their own native tongue, not to mention foreign ones. Many of our institution are rapidly becoming transformed into old 19th century trade schools, where students learn the fundamentals of automotive mechanics, surveying, and public accounting. Even the graduates of our most prestigious institutions, one might add, exhibit little sense of educated ethical values and practically no concept of morality whatsoever when the enter private industry or public service: witness, for instance, all those bright, university educated young men of the Nixon administration who were so willingly complicitous in Watergate. Finally, in spite of the battles of the sixties and seventies minorities are severely under-represented in higher education, and practically invisible at the managerial level. Women are still badly discriminated against in our profession; in 1978-79 they represented less than 25 percent of the nation's faculty.

All of this, of course, is not solely the result of administrative mismanagement of higher education--but much of it is. One could lay a good part of the blame, as Gail Parker does, in the lap of an ineffective and self-serving professoriate. In a recent issue of The Chronicle of Higher Education, Corwin King of Central Washington University bemoaned "the sad state of faculty governance," citing a present-day faculty

largely "characterized by indifference and timidity."[6] True enough. But I would lay this one back on the administration, too. Ever since the turmoil of the universities in the late 60s, university administrations have made a conscious effort to recruit political neutrals or conservatives, and to exclude perceived "troublemakers." What they mean by these terms is by no means clear, incidentally, but the general thrust of their thinking comes through: they have wanted timid faculty who will keep their mouths shut. And for the most part, they now have them. I suspect that the Bell Telephone Company has virtually been kept in business by presidents and vice-presidents in higher education attempting to winnow out sinners from the job market. Furthermore, the budgetary restrictions of higher education in recent years have worked to the advantage of administrations that seek quiescence on campus: the lack of full-time, tenure-track positions has allowed them to hire great numbers of part-time-temporary staff, who are severed from the main life of the university and have no rights to grievance or due process. In the California State system, for instance, part-time employees comprise 47 percent of the total faculty. If university governance is currently comprised of the indifferent and timid--and my own experience confirms this--I suspect that university administrations want it that way. To twist an old adage, moins de change, plus de la meme chose.

If this is the situation, what can be done about it? Probably not much. I admire Hazard Adams' suggestion in The Academic Tribes that administrative offices should be filled by faculty for limited rotating terms, but it is doubtful that our managerial elite would acquiesce to their own demise. They are more apt to hunker down and fight. Collective bargaining is gaining a foothold nationally, and the California state system in which I am employed is rapidly approaching a collective bargaining election for the first time. While I'm not overly optimistic about its power to change things, I do feel that collective bargaining might tilt the balance of power slightly away from centralized authority. If nothing more, it should cause faculty to drop some of their dearly held myths and sit at the bargaining table over real issues of their employment. Basically, though, I agree with Corwin King that "faculties will get only as much

power as they are willing to insist on."[7] And probably only as much as they deserve.

If higher education is to regain a vigorous and active faculty who take pride in their institution and their profession, if universities are once more going to become centers of genuine learning and a harbinger of values that determine the national morality, professors will have to stop seeing themselves as some privileged class of mandarins who are somehow apart from the world of work and everyday life. When I look around at my colleagues in the profession, in fact, I have to say along with Aunt Alice, "They look like working-class people to me."

NOTES

[1] Gail Thain Parker, The Writing on the Wall (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1979), p. 158.

[2] Parker, p. 16.

[3] Glenn S. Dumke, "What is a University Not," Leaders (April, May, June, 1979), p. 66.

[4] Dumke, p. 66.

[5] Nicholas Demereth, Richard Stephens, and R. Robb Taylor, Power, Presidents, and Professors (New York: Basic Books, 1967), pp. 21-22.

[6] Corwin King, "The Sad State of Faculty Governance," Chronicle of Higher Education, 19 (November 19, 1979), p. 48.

[7] King, p. 48.